



# GOING DEEP

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO TAKE RISKS, MAKE MISTAKES AND MASTER DIFFICULT MATERIAL

*Essays by*

JAVIER VELAZQUEZ | JENNIFER CORROY | JOSALYN TRESVANT | KEITH ROBINSON

# INTRODUCING AMAZING

Great teachers challenge students to achieve more than they ever thought possible. That's why we award the Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice, which annually recognizes a select cohort of public school teachers who demonstrate exceptionally effective teaching with students from high-poverty communities. Founded in 2012, the Prize is named for Shira Fishman, a TNTP-trained math teacher who has received local and national recognition for her achievements at McKinley Technology High School in Washington, D.C. Now in its second year, the Fishman Prize has emerged as a showcase for some of the nation's best educators, amplifying their voices so that others can learn from their inspiring classrooms.

Our selection process is lengthy and rigorous. No more than five teachers are awarded the prize each year. In 2013, more than 570 teachers applied. About 100 were invited to submit teaching videos, and 20 were selected as semi-finalists for unannounced classroom observations by TNTP. Nine finalists were interviewed by an expert panel of judges including Shira Fishman—and four were named winners.

In addition to receiving \$25,000—one of the country's largest monetary awards for practicing teachers—winners collaborate during a virtual summer residency, reflecting on their classroom practices, exploring the larger issues that shape their profession and contributing to TNTP's own efforts to help schools and teachers understand and support excellent instruction for all students. During a series of visits to New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C., the 2013 winners met with top educators, policy makers and journalists, including leaders from The College Board, writers from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, and senior officials at the U.S. Senate, the Department of Education and the White House. These special events offer the winners an unparalleled opportunity to explore the education landscape while sharing their perspectives and classroom experiences with decision makers.

Through the Fishman Prize, we hope to provide a unique platform for the nation's finest teachers to elevate their profession without removing them from the classrooms where they do their most important work. As a central part of the experience, TNTP invites the winners to capture some essential elements of their practice in writing, telling the story of their own classrooms in their own voices. We publish these essays in an annual collection that highlights the skills and strategies the Fishman Prize winners use to achieve extraordinary results. This collection includes the essays of our 2013 winners.



**2013**

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*“Seeing what is happening in so many classrooms gives me hope for where our country is headed. It is so inspiring to see hundreds of teachers making incredible academic gains—and clearly making a huge difference in the lives of their students—yet constantly pushing themselves to do even more. This year’s winners are an incredible group who make me proud to share their profession.”*

*—Shira Fishman*

## TAKING RISKS, REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

*The best teachers help students overcome their fear of mistakes, push their thinking beyond the first answer and ask the tough questions that lead to unfamiliar places.*

In the classroom, as in life, there isn’t always one correct answer. One of the hallmarks of higher-order thinking in any academic discipline is the ability to tolerate uncertainty, negotiate opposing viewpoints and take risks on the path to new knowledge.

For many teachers, one of the most persistent challenges is encouraging students to go beyond the basics, stretch their thinking and take ownership of their own learning. Yet how can we inspire students to put forth the massive amounts of effort necessary for success when that effort might be met with uncertainty—or even failure?

This is the question our four 2013 Fishman Prize winners chose to address in these essays: *How can teachers encourage students to take the intellectual risks necessary to master rigorous academic content?*

As educators lead their students to meet increasingly rigorous standards, it takes a leap of faith on the part of the teacher and the student to make real learning happen. Yet what may seem like magic in a Fishman Prize winner’s classroom is actually a careful blend of classroom culture, rigorous content and meticulous planning.

The best teachers help students overcome their fear of mistakes, push their thinking beyond the first answer and ask the tough questions that lead to unfamiliar places. In watching and listening to the Fishman Prize winners, one theme became immediately clear: They share an ability to make themselves almost incidental in the classroom, freeing students to make choices—and mistakes—that allow them to explore a subject and arrive at their own conclusions. By turning the fear of failure into an appetite for growth, these teachers give students true ownership of their learning—and their futures.

In their own unique ways, the Fishman Prize winners ask more of their students by pushing them to take risks in their learning. The results are astounding, from teaching students on the U.S.-Mexico border to master a demanding International Baccalaureate curriculum, to helping special education students in Memphis track their own progress toward college readiness, to guiding students to embrace questions and uncertainty in Newark and Chicago.

It’s no simple task, and these essays represent just a small slice of the variety of techniques you might see on any given day in these classrooms. Yet one conviction they share is that knowledge stems from curiosity, and that mastery is earned through deliberate effort over time.

Read on to get a glimpse into four incredible classrooms where students are consistently achieving at high levels, and see what happens when teachers encourage risk-taking, celebrate mistakes on the path to success and refuse to let frustration or fear of failure limit students’ potential. We’re proud to introduce you to four of the best teachers in the country, and we hope the 2013 Fishman Prize winners can give you some fresh answers—and some new questions.





# JAVIER VELAZQUEZ

## 6th GRADE MATH

*Howe School of Excellence  
Chicago, Ill.*

*Originally trained as* an architect at MIT, Javier Velazquez earned his teaching certification through the Academy for Urban School Leadership in his native Chicago. He has spent a decade as a middle school math teacher in the city's turnaround schools, leading urban students to results that are the envy of far more affluent suburbs.

In his first year at the Howe School of Excellence four years ago, only 35 percent of his incoming sixth graders had met standards on the previous year's math assessment. By the following year, 77 percent of students met or exceeded state standards. The growth didn't end there. For the past three years, Javier's students have grown an average of 10 to 14 points on Measures of Academic Performance assessments, well above the expected 6-point growth per year.

Teachers often say their highest aim is to see their students learning to think, not just to comply. But how? Javier is one of those teachers who methodically coaches thinking. His students learn to use multiple approaches to solve complex problems. It is a joy to watch.

"He is an absolutely genuine person, which comes across immediately in his teaching and when he talks about teaching," Shira Fishman said. "He is invested in his students, builds relationships with them and gets so much out of his students because of the relationships he builds."

His essay "What if the Question is the Answer?" allows Javier to walk us through the in-depth questioning method that he uses to help students experience the joy and challenge inherent in the problem-solving process. More often than not, it starts with one simple word: "Why?"



## WHAT IF THE QUESTION IS THE ANSWER?

*No idea is ever wrong in our class.  
Some comments are just easier to disprove.*

I thumb through money in my wallet while my students put away their Do Nows and write the heading for today's lesson on clean sheets of paper. One by one, they sit up and take notice as I hold a few bills high for all to see. As with most everything in our class, today's lesson begins with what seems like an easy question.

"I have \$30 in my wallet," I say. "What if I wanted to give Alyce half of it? What is one-half of \$30?"

Students of all ability levels raise their hands, eager to take the easy bait. I call on a student who rarely raises his hand, knowing he tends to get lost in his thoughts during lessons. This is the perfect opportunity to get him hooked early.

"Diamonte, how much is one-half of \$30?" He crunches some numbers in his head and on his fingers, then replies, "\$15!"

I write the problem on the board without the answer. The class follows my lead, but I don't verify whether Diamonte's reply is correct. He begins to write, then freezes as I ask the next question: "Why do you think Diamonte said one-half of \$30 is \$15?"

Several students offer their support for Diamonte's answer, using division, diagrams and stories, confirming that he was correct. Diamonte unfreezes and copies the ideas students have suggested.

In our classroom, one question only leads to another. That problem didn't require too much digging, but my students know that the questioning has only just begun. This is where the fun in math lies.

### **The Long, Boring Dance to Nowhere**

Being bombarded by questions—and sometimes getting the wrong answer—is a major part of our classroom experience, but it hasn't always been that way.

In years past, I noticed that students got stuck on questions as they desperately tried to avoid making mistakes. It was

disheartening to see fear paralyze them, keeping them from offering a suggestion, a possible approach to a problem, or even an opinion. But it wasn't just my students' attitudes that created this feeling of being stuck. It was my very approach to teaching math.

My teaching was like a long, boring dance. I'd write a few problems on the board and students would take notes on the one method I would demonstrate for solving that particular problem. (If they got lucky during a lesson, maybe we'd discuss two ways to get to an answer!) The students would try their best to comply. Those who understood the steps might share the correct answer. I'd assign a few more problems to practice our moves in class. We'd share. More problems for homework. Then, thankfully, the dance would end until the next lesson.

Conversations about the Common Core State Standards and raising the rigor of student work were still years away, but even then it was apparent that my practice demanded very little of my students. I did nothing to encourage them to explore multiple approaches. I did very little in terms of having them explain their thoughts and ideas.

I imagine very few of my students found any joy in learning math this way. I probably even crushed the spirits of a few aspiring mathematicians using this process. I usually wound up talking to myself during lessons. The most common question I asked was, "You get it, right?"

### **Something Had to Change**

My students could learn more if they took a more active role, but that would require them to take more risks and overcome their fear of making mistakes. If my students were to take these risks as learners, I had to take the first step in a new direction.

Even though I knew it might make it more difficult to plan and manage my classroom, my focus shifted away from simply helping students get a right answer. I needed them to justify and support their thinking. I needed them to realize that I was more concerned with their thoughts and voices, even if it took all of our class time to only do one or two problems. I started asking my students, "Why?"

## *I started asking my students “Why?” a lot.*

I asked them that a lot. Soon I became obsessed with questions, like:

“Can you explain why you said that?”

“Why do we need order of operations?”

“That was easy. How can we make this problem more difficult?”

“How should I approach this problem?”

“Why is it more difficult to solve this problem compared to the one we saw earlier?”

“Why do you think she thinks that?”

“Does that approach work if we are working with four different units of measure?”

“Does anyone have another way to solve this problem?”

“What if I changed the coefficient in the equation?”

“I think the area of a triangle is the same as the area of a square. What do you think?”

Using pointed questions to prod my students toward key ideas and new understanding not only resulted in more content mastery, it made math more enjoyable for everyone—including me.

I was no longer talking to myself. Through my questioning, the final answer became secondary, and it was clear to my students that the process was more important. If they want the floor in our classroom, they need to have the justification and thoughts to support their ideas, because every statement or supposed final answer just leads to another question. As student voices became more prominent, mine took a back seat.

Not all classes are the same, and some require constant modeling or support to fully engage in this process and the discourse that accompanies it. But almost without fail, I begin to see evidence that they are taking ownership of their learning.

Students begin comparing their processes: “Well, I did it this way!” They begin leaving extra space in their notebooks for more ideas and approaches. They begin to demand justification for their classmates’ thinking: “But he never said why he did that!”

My high-performing students now struggle with questions as much as lower-performing students. The correct answer could already be on the board, but the focus has shifted to proving why it’s right. Students begin testing new approaches, stumping each other, and asking clarifying questions. Those who were so concerned with not making mistakes are now distracted by the multitude of questions being hurled at them.

Not surprisingly, this process of constantly questioning and evaluating student thinking has slowly resulted in improved student performance in my class. A culture of questioning and exploration has replaced the long, boring dance.

And that’s when I know I have them hooked.



Questions can start just about anywhere.



## How It Works:

### The Process of Student Questioning

The class watches as I count out \$15 and walk toward Alyce, who hesitantly reaches for the money. The students burst into laughter as I abruptly pull away and put the money back into my pocket. “Wait, I need that money for dinner tonight. Sorry, Alyce.”

Then I turn to the class.

“Well, why was finding one-half of \$30 so easy for most of you?” I ask, trying to look as puzzled as possible.

“Because all we had to do was cut the number in half,” Amari responds, supporting his answer with a picture of money being split between two people. “Like sharing it between you and Diamonte.”

Our goal for this lesson is learning how to find a fractional part of a whole. I could give the class a few easy questions with a strategy for solving these types of problems as prescribed by a textbook. Then I could slowly increase the difficulty, practice a few problems as a class and assign a few more for homework. But I want my students to explore the concept without me holding their hands.

“So what could make the problem more difficult?” I counter. And now the class struggles to figure out what could take the problem to the next level. I don’t offer any suggestions or hints. I take and consider most student answers, writing them down under the heading, “Medium-Type Questions.” We explore some answers more than others because they cause a stir in the class. We discuss the merits of whether some ideas are truly more difficult than one-half of 30.

I’m posing questions that challenge them to tackle the concept by making connections to strategies and knowledge they already possess. As students take more responsibility for making connections and arriving at conclusions through my questioning, they arrive at the deeper understanding of content that is key to long-term mastery. These techniques are the opposite of the standard test-prep approach, yet they prepare students to tackle the demands of those assessments more effectively. New question types and situations hardly faze my students because they have practiced how to approach a problem instead of following a standard procedure.

Finding the fractional part of a whole is a new concept for most of my students, so this opening discussion goes in a variety of directions. I gladly write down student ideas and offer counters when appropriate to push their thought, but I always allow students to present their opinions. But, eventually, one student brings us back toward my predetermined goal.

*These techniques are the opposite of the standard test-prep approach, yet they prepare students to tackle the demands of those assessments more effectively.*

## MAKING QUESTIONING SAFE

This shift was possible because of the culture of respect already present in my class. Everyone feels safe, and most of my students feel free to share, even if it’s just an “I agree with Jada” type of response.

To encourage my students to appropriately challenge each other, I quickly correct any laughter or inappropriate student reactions. “That’s wrong!” soon becomes, “I disagree with you because...” To alleviate students’ reluctance to participate in the conversation, I teach some basic sentence and question starters they could easily use to begin their thoughts. “I agree with Amari because...” or “Why didn’t you...” are a few of the options I share to help them take those risks.

Most students run with these suggestions and take great pleasure in answering and asking questions. With continuous modeling and positive reinforcement early in the year, they soon begin to own the language that promotes this positive culture.

After a few weeks of being immersed in this approach, students start to feel more confident in suggesting ideas and taking risks, knowing that all ideas will be considered and lead to more questions from me. The worst a student will hear in response to an idea is “interesting” from me, or “I don’t agree, because...” from a classmate. Neither of which hurts too much.

“If you change the fraction to something besides one-half, it’ll get more hard!” Lazerick exclaims, relieved that I finally acknowledged his hand after he had been waving frantically for so many other questions. I knew he made the connection much earlier, but I didn’t want him to give it away too quickly and ruin other students’ thinking. He patiently waited, even offering counters to why one-half of 50, another student’s suggestion, wasn’t really a harder question.

“Interesting,” I say, as I write “ $\frac{2}{5}$  of 30 = ?” on the board. I let them arrive at exploring a fraction other than one-half through my questioning, allowing them an opportunity to see the connections between something they consider easy and something that would start to be more challenging. Now they are more than eager to take on a problem slightly out of their grasp.

Trevell offers, “Well, if we have \$30 in all, it has to be less than \$15.”

Before he can even justify his thinking, I call on Shainia to try to explain his statement, intentionally ignoring the waving hands of Lazerick and Shakierra.

“Maybe because it can’t be half anymore because the fraction changed,” Shainia guesses.

“I see,” I reply.

No idea is ever wrong in our class. Some comments are just easier to disprove. But everyone understands that being able to get a right answer is hardly ever the point. Lazerick and Shakierra now shift their attention away from the answer they wanted so desperately to share and focus instead on Trevell’s statement.

“So the answer has to be 9, because that is less than 15,”

I interject, and a new wave of hands and enthusiasm ensues.

Teammates talking through problems.





## What it Takes: Planning for an Improvised Play

Many times when I have shared my questioning practice with other math teachers, they go back to their classrooms and begin to greet every student comment with “Why?”

“Why?” can easily push student thought and produce discourse, but without any other type of question it can start to feel like a teacher is just challenging a student’s answer, instead of extending an invitation to share thoughts and ideas. You can’t just endlessly ask, “Why?”

You have to know where you’re going.

Before I begin questioning, I spend a great deal of time clearly defining the outcomes of a lesson. These goals fit into my scope and sequence for the school year and reflect general weaknesses as identified by student data. Once I have identified the concepts that will require “digging,” I review lesson plans on that particular concept that I have generated for the past several years. These plans are filled with questions that I know will push my students’ thinking.

Questions that invite students’ thoughts and opinions, which I often preface with a declarative statement, are great starts for introducing questioning and increasing student engagement in a lesson, and I actively look for opportunities to include them in my planning.

“I jumped 36 inches,” I say, “and Diamonte jumped *only* 3 feet! He’s so weak—I smashed him! *Right?*”

Intentionally making a mistake or having a student demonstrate a mistake is another sure way to generate rich and pointed questions. “Who agrees with the work Diamond just put on the board? *Why? What did she do wrong? What did you do? How is this different?*” Each year, I add new questions and approaches, enriching the discourse I hope to generate with my students.

My lesson plans include a detailed script of questions and the responses I will try to elicit from students. I imagine the lesson unfolding like an improvised play, with my predetermined questions and common misconceptions acting as the catalyst. I don’t know which direction a lesson will necessarily take, but I know what questions and ideas I need to offer to push student discourse, and when to wrap things up.

This kind of planning requires a strong understanding of content. I always enjoyed math as a student, but my comfort level with the content is also a result of my efforts to continuously absorb more strategies and student mistakes. I regularly scour through different textbooks, online resources and assessments, looking for new approaches and strategies to add to my lessons. This not only helps in the planning stage,

*I imagine the lesson unfolding like an improvised play, with my predetermined questions and common misconceptions acting as the catalyst.*

but also in having the comfort level to consider and explore the different ideas that students will potentially hurl at me in class during a lesson. Honestly, though, the best part is when I get a student question that baffles me, too, and we get to explore it together.

## How It Ends: Knowing When to Stop

Instructional time is precious and eventually the questioning has to stop. At some point I must offer more concrete solutions and strategies for solving problems. There are other times when a particular topic just does not necessitate a rigorous line of questioning. Some math content, such as identifying the names of triangles, is more straightforward and does not require as much questioning to forge connections between previous knowledge. Not every math topic needs so many “Whys?”

My students, however, remain obsessed with questions.

“But Mr. V., why is it called an acute triangle?” one asks.

I chalk it up to my constant prodding, proud that my students are still looking for more depth.

Other times, I cut the questioning short even when a topic merits more exploration, because the data I have collected from the students shows that they have reached mastery. For anyone who needs additional support, the questioning could easily continue through remediation in small groups or extra help outside of class. I can ask students to support their answers and solutions endlessly, but there has to be a stopping point, and certain content has to take precedence when time is a factor.

Yet as the Common Core standards take root in our classrooms, this level of questioning is one method to foster the depth of mastery required of our students. Creating an environment where student ideas and risk-taking are valued will instill the confidence necessary for students to reach that mastery. It’s no coincidence that my students leave my classroom as confident math learners ready to ask their new teachers, “Why is that?”

They have developed the higher-order thinking skills necessary to tackle new situations and problems. They’ve learned how to consider a multitude of ideas and approaches, how to process others’ ideas and validate their own, and how to clarify or correct someone else’s suggestion. Most importantly, they have learned to never be satisfied with just being able to get the right answer, because that “Why?” will surely follow.



# JENNIFER CORROY

11th–12th GRADE ENGLISH

*IDEA College Preparatory Donna  
Donna, Texas*

*Jennifer Corroy* grew up and attended school in Wisconsin, but has made her career for nearly a decade deep in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. She began her teaching career as a 2004 Teach For America corps member and has taught for the past three years at IDEA College Preparatory in Donna, Texas.

Jennifer has played a crucial role in furthering IDEA's mission to raise student achievement, developing an intense and rigorous English curriculum to prepare her students for success on the literary assessment of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, and for the challenges they'll face in college. Last year, 80 percent of her students scored high enough on the IB exam to earn college credit, and all of them passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Jennifer is the high school English teacher we all wish we had. She describes her instructional process as “demystifying academic writing,” as she shows students how to interpret literature, from understanding an author's intention to seeing multiple meanings in the same text.

“She has taken her students to some incredible levels and she does it while encouraging them to create their own learning,” Shira Fishman said. “She emphasizes the ‘no right answer’ concept when analyzing complex literature in a way that allows her students to take risks and share their thoughts and answers in a safe environment.”

In her essay, “Pulling Back the Curtain: Empowering Students to Engage with Literature (and Life),” Jennifer describes how she uses children's books and college-level literary theory to introduce her high school students to sophisticated analysis, empowering them to take ownership of literary texts—and their lives.



## PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN: EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH LITERATURE (AND LIFE)

*I want students to see that in literature, and in life, their efforts to interpret and respond to the world around them are valid, even if they don't align with the dominant paradigm.*

As I read a children's book aloud to my high school juniors, Lizzy laughs so hard she nearly falls out of her chair. Others crane their necks to see the pictures of Piggie and Gerald, the cartoon stars of Mo Willems' *We Are in a Book!* who are slowly realizing that they are being read by a reader. The few students trying to hold their cool can't help but crack tiny smiles at my animated performance. On the last page, Piggie implores the reader to "read us again," and my students unanimously agree that is exactly what we should do.

Years ago, some people were skeptical that I used picture books to teach vocabulary to eighth graders. Now I use similar methods to pull back the curtain on the high-level literary analysis required of my International Baccalaureate (IB) English Literature students.

I teach in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, near the U.S.-Mexico border. My students enter my class with various levels of readiness, but in less than two years they will all be starting college. The majority will be first-generation college students at risk of struggling or dropping out, no matter how successful they were in high school. To succeed, they will need more than an acceptance letter; they will need critical thinking, reading and writing skills beyond what is required for high school graduation.

For many of them, the world of literature feels foreign and inaccessible, but it's a world they have to learn to navigate quickly. They all need to complete IB coursework that requires them to write essays, give presentations, craft written commentaries on texts and deliver oral commentaries on randomly selected poems. Their assessments will require them to do college-level work, and there's rarely one right answer. Both aspects are intimidating to students who are often eager to find the fastest route to the "correct" idea.

That's why I start the year with a four-lesson unit intended to demystify the work of literary analysis and get them thinking for themselves. This opening lesson with Piggie and Gerald has two important purposes: setting students up for incredibly rigorous work, and empowering them to see themselves as valid players in whatever arenas may at first appear inaccessible to them throughout their lives.

I want students to see that in literature, and in life, their efforts to interpret and respond to the world around them are valid, even if they don't align with the dominant paradigm. I want them to believe they have the authority to assert opinions, ask questions, challenge establishments and advocate for themselves. It's a lesson that I hope my students will draw on for the rest of their lives: *You can do it.*

### **Lesson 1: Authors Do Things for a Reason**

Many students think about meaning in literature as if it magically appears in a text. Consequently, they wait for teachers to explain meaning because it seems impossible to uncover on their own.

I want students to see that meaning is in part created by the work of the author, so that they will see a text as a series of decisions worth analyzing. First, I have to help students truly grasp the significance of the author's existence, and his or her role in creating meaning.

I start the unit by reading *We Are in a Book!* aloud, a story in which Piggie and Gerald not only realize that they are in a book being read, but also that they can manipulate the reader into saying a word ("banana"). I chose a children's book because it is accessible to everyone in the class, and I don't preface the reading at all; I just want the students to enjoy the story and to see a playful side of me as I go all-in during the read-aloud.

It's a lot of fun, but at the end, I deny the desperate requests for a second reading. We have an important matter to discuss: Piggie's manipulative behavior in making me say, "BANANA!" (twice).

What Piggie talks about openly is what is going on behind the scenes in every book, I tell my students. Authors are constantly manipulating readers. Just as Piggie decided which word I



would say, authors decide what emotions they want you to feel, what reactions they want you to have to a character, what ideas they want you to contemplate. But, unlike Piggie, they use a complicated and often undetected set of techniques to influence readers and to create meaning in their works.

Students tend to nod along in quick agreement—it makes sense. But that’s not enough. They have to see that each moment in a text is a result of the author’s decision and is a possible place for interpretation.

I put it to the students: “Piggie made me say ‘banana.’ Not ‘grape’ and not ‘obsequious.’ Why?”

“It was funny,” is the quickest response.

Another student chimes in: “I don’t even know what ‘obsequious’ means.”

I add that “banana” is a particularly easy and fun word to shout. I want them to see that an author’s decision can be tied to many things—the mood, the sound or more. Then I ask them, “How would our experience have changed if the word had been ‘obsequious’?”

“It wouldn’t have been as funny. I would have been confused.”

I can see the deeper realization coming to many of the students. Left unquestioned, the word “banana” would have seemed inevitable or arbitrary, taken for granted as the only way the book could possibly have been written. Now, they start to see the many choices the author made as important, and how those choices change the reader’s experience.

In the case of Piggie’s manipulation of his reader, we can assume that Mo Willems wanted us to be amused. Moments of manipulation like this are all around us. I encourage students to consider intent in other areas besides literature. Do historians or textbook writers have agendas in how they present their material? What about news programs? Teachers?

“Miss, are you trying to manipulate us?”

“Yes. Every day. Is it working?”

## Lesson 2: The Author is Dead

For the second lesson, I announce that we are going to read another children’s book. After the students get excited, I explain that it will actually be a very sad book that chronicles a tale of men’s endless capacity to take advantage of women.

I proceed to read aloud Shel Silverstein’s classic *The Giving Tree*, the story of a young boy and his lifelong relationship with a tree that meets his needs in ever-changing ways.

Yet today, the students will hear a decidedly feminist reading of *The Giving Tree*. It is amazing what a few carefully placed pauses, some side commentary and extra volume for key words can do. It becomes obvious what meaning I am going for in this reading—the book is about an abusive relationship in which a woman is cut down and destroyed by a careless and selfish man.

Ariana may never forgive me for “ruining [her] favorite children’s book!” Like most of her classmates, she has always seen the story as a happy tale of unconditional love. And, like most high school students, she assumes that the dominant reading of any text—and the one presumably intended by the author—is the only valid one.

My goal on this day is to liberate students from the often-paralyzing quest to determine the “correct” meaning of a text. Many students are afraid to suggest ideas about texts because they fear being “wrong,” and because they rightfully detect that they can never really know what the author intended. Yet they also use this as an excuse to avoid participating. To overcome the fear and excuses, I need students to see that the reader also plays a significant role in meaning-making.

“Come on, Miss Corroy!” Mychael objects.

“That’s what it says!” I say, innocently pointing at the book.

A great debate is already brewing in their minds before I finish, so I am more hands-off in debriefing this book. After giving students a moment to vent their rage or murmur their initial reactions, I try to guide their discussion around the question: “Was that a valid reading?”

Ariana is too angry to speak, but it is obvious that she doesn’t think so. Yet.

I continue to offer little more than questions to keep the conversation productive.

“If Shel Silverstein were here, what do you think his response would be?” I ask.

“He would tell you that you are wrong,” she says. “He would be offended.”

“Does it matter?” I push.

“Yes. You are a horrible person, Ms. Corroy.”

“What if he said this reading is actually what he intended?”

I ask. “In that case, would this book then no longer be a valid parable about unconditional love, as most people see it?”

“I would still think it’s about love, even if Shel Silverstein didn’t mean it to be (which I think he did). So, then I guess your reading has to be valid, too. But I still think it is wrong.”



### Learning to analyze literature.

“Yes!” I exclaim.

This is the moment I’ve been waiting for.

I ask the key questions of the day: “Is there a difference between ‘right’ and ‘valid’? If an author did not intend a meaning, does that mean it cannot be there?”

Ultimately, the students see that, whether Shel Silverstein intended to or not, I could argue that he has given us a parable through which we can engage in a critical discussion of gender roles in our society. In this way, the lesson can give us a model for how to open up to a more critical engagement with the world around us.

*The lesson can give us a model for how to open up to a more critical engagement with the world around us.*

Stepping away from literature, I ask them to consider: “What about when someone makes a comment or joke that comes off as offensive when he or she didn’t intend to be? Is an offended listener’s response invalid because the speaker didn’t intend to be hurtful? What about when a public policy inadvertently discriminates against a group of people?”

Usually a student can offer an example of a time when a joke they thought was funny offended someone. Everybody can think of a time they’ve been misunderstood. Suddenly, it becomes more real for them to see that intention does not always control meaning. Ideally, a student comes up with an

example from history, such as “separate but equal” or Manifest Destiny; if not, I make the point.

Students can see that those policies may have seemed good to the people who authored/intended them, but they were experienced differently by affected groups, and they are viewed differently by people today. They start to point out school policies and even national politics that affect their lives. Are there valid ways to “read” these things other than what students usually hear or are expected to believe?

I want students to see that unintended meaning can be all around us, that we must read the world as carefully as any text, and that they have the right to explore their responses to literature and to the world, even when those responses go against dominant thinking.

That’s not to say that anything goes, of course—which brings us to the next lesson.

### Lesson 3: It’s Not About Aliens

After my “The Author is Dead” lesson, I deserve what I inevitably get—the same comment most English teachers have heard at some point: “In that case, the poem could be about anything I want!”

False! That misconception—that anything goes—is exactly what this lesson is designed to combat. It asks students to revisit the question of what makes an interpretation valid.

I have students begin by reading and discussing Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” an ambiguous poem, rich with imagery, about a boy dancing with his father.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably,

<sup>1</sup> I learned this lesson’s entire workshop from Sheridan Blau at Teachers College at Columbia University. He has written about the workshop and the theory behind it in his book *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2003), pp. 60-78.

two dominant but very different interpretations of the poem emerge, which is why this particular poem works so well for this lesson.

Some students see a poem about abuse; others see a warm memory. Often, students are shocked by the alternative to their own reading and eager to defend their stance. Other times, one interpretation dominates the early conversation, and I have to push for an opposing view.

“So, did everyone initially see this poem as upsetting?” I ask.

Bryan cautiously ventures a comment: “I actually thought it seemed happy, like the kid loves remembering his dad.”

“Yes!” I say.

I ecstatically ask for lines to serve as evidence. Students perk up at the affirmation Bryan gets for bravely disagreeing with the popular idea (this moment is yesterday’s lesson on “The Author is Dead” in action!). Suddenly, half the class has “happy memory” evidence to volunteer.

We make a chart detailing evidence in favor of each interpretation. In the end, many of the same lines appear on both sides of the chart. We return to the question from “The Author is Dead.”

*Are both readings valid?*

Ultimately, because there is substantial evidence for both readings throughout the poem, we decide that, yes, you could argue for either interpretation in a valid way. I call this the “spectrum of valid interpretation,” to emphasize that although today’s lesson starts with two apparently opposing interpretations, many different interpretations of the same work can be valid.

Usually at this point a student objects: “OK. Then the poem can be about anything I want.” Here is a rare instance where I am firm about “right” and “wrong” in my classroom.

I put it to the class: “Is there evidence that would allow me to make a valid argument that this poem is about space aliens?”

The answer of course is “no,” and the message is that the spectrum of valid interpretation has a beginning and an end, and some things (usually aliens) are obviously not on it. The burden is on the reader to evaluate the body of evidence for a given interpretation against the entire work, and sufficient evidence is required to make an interpretation “valid.”

The same is true in any discipline or life endeavor. There can be multiple ways to solve a math problem, but that doesn’t mean

*I start by empowering them to deconstruct literature, with the long-term goal of empowering them to deconstruct and eventually remake the world.*

*anything* goes, or that there isn’t a final right answer. There can be a rich debate about a historical event, but certain facts (like lines in a poem) cannot be discarded for convenience. Your initial feelings about a situation in life can be anything, but your final response should be carefully considered and well supported.

#### **Lesson 4: It’s Never Just Raining**

In the final lesson, I address a common weakness with students in the literature classroom: they simply don’t know what they are looking for when reading a text. After a teacher introduces a symbol, a theme, or another point of analysis, students are often quick to engage. Afterward, however, they often remark: “But how did you know that was the symbol?”

I want students to realize that I’m not actually smarter than they are when it comes to thinking about a text; I just know key places to look for meaning, like in animals, colors and more.

To drive this message home, I have students read Thomas C. Foster’s book *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*.<sup>2</sup> With chapters on basic ways to interpret food, religion, quest narratives, sex, weather and more, he lets students in on what has generally seemed like a mystery to them: exactly where they might look for meaning in a text. This is a skill that we generally expect students to be able to do, yet we rarely teach them exactly how to do it.

One of my favorite chapters to discuss is on weather: “It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow.” Most of my students have seen the movie *The Notebook*, and many of my girls swoon at the drop of its name. If I remember correctly (having been made to watch this movie with said swooning girls on a long bus ride), there is a dramatic scene when the couple is reunited, and it is pouring rain.

In class, I bring up this scene, and I say: “Look, do you think this is a coincidence? They are shooting the reunion scene—when the bad past is cleansed and washed away and the sexual tension is just waiting to be released—and suddenly it just starts pouring down rain, and the director is like, ‘Hey, it’s raining. Let’s go with it!’ *No. Not. A. Coincidence.*”

I want students to see that there are “standard elements of interpretation” that we can use as starting points for finding

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<sup>2</sup> Foster, Thomas C. (2003) *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. New York: Harper.



meaning in texts. These are available to everyone, and once students know where to look, they will find them, as well.

Before I know it, students are coming up with examples from other movies, returning from the weekends complaining that Ramiro “couldn’t stop analyzing” the weather and other standard elements of whatever new movie they went to see. Ramiro is excited to defend what an awesome insight he had about the movie’s plot. While his classmates give a playful groan, I know that they are starting to see the work of analysis as fun, available to them and relevant even outside my class.

All of the lessons are coming together. They see the significance of discrete decisions by an artist, they honor their own role in interpreting it, they ground their ideas in relevant evidence and they see formerly minor details as rich places for interpretation. As they make the leap from applying these skills in my classroom to the movies, I know they will make it to other aspects of their academic and civic lives.

### **Pulling Back the Curtain on Literature and the World**

Throughout the year, there are many things I do to make the work of reading, writing and thinking about literature more possible for my students. Together, these four lessons deconstruct the work of meaning-making in a way that banishes any excuses students have to resist the challenge, while ensuring them that they have the skills and the right to engage with it.

It is not to say that after four lessons all fear drops away and students magically produce college-level work. But by giving them the tools they need and constantly reiterating the messages that this work is possible—that they can do it and their voices are valid—I have seen students begin taking risks and letting go of the idea that only the “right answer” exists, much less that it lies with me rather than with them.

It starts with students like Bryan venturing an opinion he might otherwise have dismissed as “wrong” because his classmates were all saying something else. It gets really good when Dacia, on the opening day of discussing *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, remarks, “The first line says, ‘This is the story of a real woman,’ but what does that even mean—what is a ‘real’ woman anyway?” Best of all is seeing these young students and their peers return from the first year of college with a shared message no matter what they had been studying: *We can do this.*

In any subject, students often come to the work convinced that it is beyond them. If we can break down the tools of our disciplines into manageable skills and concepts for students to

grasp, we will encourage them to participate in the real work of academia while inviting them to shift their perception about the power structures all around them.

Realizing that high-level academic work is not reserved for an elite few can be a gateway to helping students see that participation in higher education, in the business world, in politics or in other realms, is not off-limits to them, either. I start by empowering them to deconstruct literature, with the long-term goal of empowering them to deconstruct and eventually remake the world.

In my classroom, it starts with changing what seems possible for students to do with literature. Just as Piggie realized that he was being “read,” I hope my students will realize that we are all “reading” the world around us, and that their voices are valid and powerful ones to lend to that work. Just as Piggie saw an opportunity to participate in the development of his story, I know that my students must learn to find opportunities to influence the directions of their own.

## **FOUR LESSONS FOR DEMYSTIFYING LITERATURE**

**Authors do things for a reason:** When students realize that meaning is created by a series of choices, rather than some divine power, the work of uncovering that meaning is less intimidating.

**The author is dead:** When there is no “right” answer and meaning depends partly on the reader’s interpretation, students can no longer excuse themselves from the work by claiming that they can never “know for sure.” Additionally, if there is not one “right answer,” students are freed from the fear that their interpretation might be “wrong.”

**It’s not about aliens:** Students need to know that while there is a lot of room for play and independent thinking in literary study, there is also integrity in this work—it’s not just “anything goes.”

**It’s never just raining:** Knowing patterns and places to look for meaning gives students a starting place for exploring the various ways authors choose to use those elements.

The background of the entire page is a blue-tinted photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a young girl with dark hair is looking down at a book or paper. Behind her, another student is partially visible. The background is filled with several white paw print graphics of varying sizes, scattered across the blue overlay.

# JOSALYN TRESVANT

K-5th GRADE SPECIAL EDUCATION

*Knight Road Elementary School*

*Memphis, Tenn.*

*A graduate of* Memphis City Schools, Josalyn Tresvant traded a burgeoning career in banking to return to the school system and become a special educator through TNTP's Memphis Teaching Fellows program in 2009.

Josalyn's students, who typically enter her classroom 3 to 4 years below grade level, regularly leave her class having gained 1.5 to 2 years of growth in reading and with proficient or advanced scores on their state assessments. She enlists students in their own learning by having them sign a document that articulates their main goals for the year and by having candid conversations with them about their progress.

Great teachers tend to have great ideas, and Josalyn's thoughtful use of technology for classroom purposes is years ahead of its time. Each year, she sets up a class website to serve as a "hub" for tracking academic progress, and her students explore various technology tools in their projects and presentations. In addition, she regularly videotapes and reviews her lessons to identify and correct missed learning opportunities. The message Josalyn puts forth is not only that students should push themselves to learn new tools, but that staying connected to growth is vital to their success.

"Josalyn has so much pride in her students and their abilities," Shira Fishman said. "She doesn't make excuses and doesn't allow them to make excuses, creating a classroom where the students set ambitious goals and stop at nothing to achieve them."

In her essay, "Banking on Students," Josalyn describes how she meticulously guides her special education students through a process of reflection and goal-tracking that helps them take ownership of the behaviors and academic objectives that will steer them toward their college goals.



## BANKING ON STUDENTS

*Ultimately, I seek for scholars to assume true ownership of their progress.*

If there's one thing I've learned since becoming a teacher, it's that students aren't all that different from bankers.

Before entering the classroom, I lived in the world of finance, managing a set of bank branches for a regional bank in Tennessee. Using data and regularly tracking progress toward annual goals was a way of life. Every morning, I would pull reports of sales and deposits for the branches in our region, analyzing what we would need to do to meet our goals and turn a profit. No matter how well or how poorly a branch had done the previous year, our focus was always on future growth.

These days, as an elementary school special education teacher, I work with students who have a range of abilities and challenges. Like branch managers, they each have unique circumstances and different starting points—and the distance to their goals can be daunting. They are often acutely aware that they're starting behind their peers and always want to know how they are doing. And in my classroom, they are empowered to answer this question for themselves.

Beginning the first day of class, I help students take ownership of their learning by reflecting on the past and setting new goals. Throughout the year, they will visually track the behaviors and learning objectives that will help them close the gap with their nondisabled peers.

Careful goal setting and tracking is hardly unusual in today's schools; what makes our approach different is that my students are responsible for nearly every part of the process, from defining their goals to physically moving the markers that track their progress. Their growth is literally in their hands. For students who have often felt isolated, unchallenged and out of control of their academic direction, this can be transformative.

Just as in banking, an important part of my work in the classroom is investing groups of people in a shared “Big Goal,” and helping them understand how their personal effort contributes to the team. Here's how I do it.

### Scholars Share Out

As an elementary special education teacher, my scholars are typically 3 to 4 years below grade level in reading or math when they begin their Individualized Education Programs. They spend their days in general education classrooms, receiving support services to help them progress alongside their nondisabled peers.

Considering their academic levels, it can be daunting to help my students achieve growth throughout the year, but I am firm in my belief they can achieve with the right support—and a positive culture.

Developing that culture is an ongoing process. My first year teaching, I knew I had to have a Big Goal to invest my students in their daily learning, and I proudly unveiled it to them at the beginning of the school year. Yet they were not as invested as I was, because they had no hand in creating the goal.

That's why we now begin the year with a PowerPoint presentation that guides the class in reflection on their performance the previous year—and toward a new Big Goal for the year ahead. Some students watch from their pods, others gather on the carpet, and a note-taker jots our reflections on paper to help form commitments to our goal.

“Welcome back, scholars!” I say. “I am so excited for our learning journey this year. We accomplished a lot, but we want to top that success in a big way. Let's talk about what went well for you last year.”

“I learned about volcanoes and how they erupt!” Xavier shares.

“I was proficient in Reading on TCAP!” Jamiah shares.

More and more hands go up. As we review results from last year, we write down our experiences on a two-column chart, Wins and Challenges. I want each scholar to share one success and revisit how that accomplishment made him or her feel.

This reflectiveness helps them see the connection between their positive behaviors and their academic success. Even for students who didn't meet their goal, it can be helpful to think about their behavior. Some challenges are beyond their



control—such as a broken family car that made it difficult to get to school—but even those challenges are useful for me to gain insight into their home life for the year ahead.

You can feel the energy in the air, almost like a pep rally. This conversation starts the culture of achievement and success—framed with the positive thinking that is essential to our success in the classroom. The students are starting to think about what they will do together as a group as much as what they will achieve as individuals, and they’re seeing that everyone is striving toward something.

As strange as it may seem, it’s essentially the same conversation I used to have when I worked in banking. During our first quarter check-ins with branch managers, we would reflect on their goals—what budgets they met, and what goals they

fell short on—recalling the strategies and efforts that helped them achieve and identifying what efforts need to be carried on to the next year. We unpacked challenges like staffing issues or unfamiliar projects, and we thought through how those challenges could be overcome.

Now and then a branch manager might say something was impossible. Their neighborhood wasn’t growing, for example; they couldn’t just pick up and physically move the entire branch.

Just as I do with my students now, I encouraged those managers to look past what they thought was impossible. Focus on what’s under your control—and keep your eye on the goal.

### Scholars’ Self-Check

Once I hear each student share his or her success, I have them think about what they could have done the previous year that would have improved that success. This step is tricky. I want them to be honest, but this is not a time to lay guilt trips. To set the example of the kind of reflection I’m seeking, I share one thing that I could have done better as their teacher.

“I wish I had planned more lunch learning sessions,” I say. “That extra time may have helped some of you come closer to your goals.”

This shows that I am reflecting and that even their teacher should always strive to improve. Last year’s success should not end our journey.

Once I have revealed something more I could have done to help them learn, they consider what actions they could have taken—or stopped—to support more success in the previous year, writing down the most important one in the Challenges section of their chart. Next, I share some of the points and ask the scholars if they would like to explain how this behavior might have helped them even more the previous year.

“I could practice more on reading,” I say, sharing one student’s example. “How could this have helped someone come closer to their goal?”

“Then I would have become a better reader,” the student says.

I share another student’s goal: “‘Stop getting in trouble.’ How did this impact your learning?”

“It made me miss things in class I needed to know,” the student says.

Many special education students struggle with behavior issues that affect their progress, yet as most teachers know, discipline is a challenge for regular education students as well. The key is helping all students focus on how those behaviors connect to learning. That’s the link we’re trying to make together.



Tracking progress with a paw.

Soon we shift to creating a class goal that will help everyone come closer to improving their progress in the general curriculum. Based on the previous year and the current academic levels of my students, I facilitate a conversation that leads to us setting a Big Goal of 100 percent of students improving their reading and math skills by two grade levels by the end of the school year.

If it's difficult to invest students in their own success, it can be even more challenging to help them see how their success connects to the entire class. I stress the idea of teamwork, thinking of our class achievement like a relay race in which each person on the team needs to run a strong leg for the entire team to win. As we review the previous year's results, I make a point of celebrating the groups who did achieve 100 percent, hoping to foster a little friendly competition.

Big Goals build energy, focus and a sense of shared accountability. But just as I learned in banking, the real key is to invest people in these goals by making it personal to each individual. That means we have to take it a step further.

### Individual Scholar Folders

Once we have established our common Big Goal, I conduct individual conferences with my students to assess where they are and what two years of growth will look like for them specifically. This is vital because it helps them connect their personal growth with our Big Goal and understand how much they matter in this process.

During our individual conference, we review each child's Scholar Folder, the personal tracker they will use to follow their progress. This tracker includes space to record scores on assessments that relate to specific academic objectives. Just as importantly, it tracks personal behaviors that support individual growth, such as homework completion, class participation and conduct.

The tracker includes key milestones for the general curriculum, as well as other more personal objectives. For example, if a child's reading is at a first-grade level but he or she is in third grade, tracking to improve fluency and recognition of words that they could not read previously is added. This level of personalization goes beyond simply tracking for grade-level objectives and gives the scholar uniquely tailored goals.

This is a sensitive process that can expose students' insecurities. As Carlos once told me, "I don't want everybody in my business." That's why we close this initial conference with me assuring all students that their Scholar Folders are strictly private—for our conferences and their knowledge to help them track how they are doing. The Scholar Folder is a personal call

*"Hey, why is your paw not moving?" one student asks another after one of our celebrations. "We need your paw to move so we can make our goal."*

to action. We'll save our public celebrations for our progress toward the Big Goal.

### Where is Your Paw?

In our classroom, we have adopted the mindset that all of the knowledge we acquire and apply will help us successfully get into and complete college. At the beginning of the year, each student selects the college from which they will graduate in the future. They symbolize that commitment with a "Tiger Paw," a paw-shaped marker in their chosen college's color, representing a step on their path toward their two years of growth—and a future as a college graduate.

From that moment on, everything we do focuses on moving their Tiger Paws toward our Big Goal of two years of academic growth. Each student's paw goes on our class tracker, a long road with four time markers—6 months, 1 year, 1.5 years and 2 years—which serve as checkpoints to see where we are in relation to our goal.

At the end of each grading period (our school has four), scholars move their Tiger Paw to denote how much growth they have made. Their paws start at zero, and stay there until they have achieved at least 6 months of growth, at which point they leap to the first milestone. This helps set a rigorous tone for the year and shows students that dramatic improvement is possible with hard work. It often gives them some momentum in the form of an early win, as these first six months of growth are generally the easiest to achieve. At the end of subsequent assessment periods, they can move their Tiger Paws in smaller monthly increments.

These are always days of celebration. I unveil everyone's growth with a dramatic PowerPoint presentation that flashes students' names and faces along with their progress, which is always met by a round of applause, hoorahs and chants. The pride they feel when they can go to the tracker and move their Tiger Paw is evident on their faces. They can own that feeling of moving themselves on the tracker while simultaneously moving their academic progress. It matters to them for two reasons. Not only do they get to move their personal tracker, they are helping bring the class one step closer to its ultimate goal.

## *Hard work deserves to be recognized, whether you're in a bank or in the classroom.*

I reference our class tracker before each lesson as a reminder of why everyone must work so hard. It's not all that different from the charts or thermometers some of my branch managers used to measure their goals, or the charts they posted in the break room, highlighting sales staff achievements from the previous week. Hard work deserves to be recognized, whether you're in a bank or in a classroom.

### **Keeping Scholars on Track**

I strive to keep all of my scholars on track throughout the year, yet as in most classrooms, students progress at different rates. That's why it's important for us to connect regularly to celebrate successes or see why progress has stalled. I do that through weekly strategy check-ins with each student.

These check-ins are a lot like the regular conference calls I had with branch managers to share weekly sales updates and discuss successful strategies. In some cases, where branches were struggling, the area manager would schedule an in-depth strategy session with a branch manager to help build a sense of urgency.

In my classroom, the check-in is an informal conference that involves my briefly meeting with scholars to ensure they are tracking their scores and addressing any areas of concern. It can be a time-consuming process, but I structure the instructional flow of my classroom to build in flexibility, using time during project-based lessons or group work to meet for quick updates. Sometimes we have them at lunch, if needed.

These conferences tend to be long at the beginning of the year, but they soon evolve to quick check-ins to see if students are noticing trends in their performance or any behaviors that are affecting their progress. For students who are struggling, it can be a time to schedule more in-depth support in the future—or even set up a meeting with parents.

Ultimately, I seek for scholars to assume true ownership of their progress. I know this is happening when they begin to steer the conversation, guided by their tracker. The check-ins give them a chance to reflect on their progress, even if only for a few minutes. When scholars see the connection between their actions and their growth, it helps them feel a sense of responsibility for their learning.

I knew Derrick assumed this ownership when he took responsibility for his own Tiger Paw at a time when he was falling off track.

"I noticed you had several scores missing on last week's tracker," I said at the beginning of our check-in.

"I was sick and I couldn't come to school," he explained.

"Can I make up the work? Then maybe I'll do better so I can move my paw."

### **Sharing Goals, Sharing Success**

"Hey, why is your paw not moving?" one student asks another after one of our celebrations. "We need your paw to move so we can make our goal."

This is always music to my ears, the result of constantly referencing our goal, celebrating accomplishments and making small wins feel like big deals. We celebrate when a student passes a quiz or assignment. We cheer when a scholar is able to decode unfamiliar words in a text they could not read at the beginning of grading period. Our Big Goal is the lifeblood of our classroom culture, and each move of a Tiger Paw is a major investment that each of my students deposit toward their future success.

When I hear my scholars noticing trends of their peers and seeing how that affects our 100 percent target, I know that we have a shared vision of achieving our Big Goal. In my banking experience, we fostered this sense of shared accountability and motivation to reach branch goals. Branch managers used these goals to motivate their staff, and area managers used their own goals with their branch managers. Goals even channeled up to the regional level, where different bank regions competed to see who could exceed expectations and help the entire institution reach its annual goals.

If everyone has a clear goal in mind, and everyone understands how their individual behavior contributes to that goal, powerful things can happen. In the classroom, reaching our goals doesn't result in some big incentive payout that was common in the banking world—it results in something even more enticing. It allows my scholars to start closing the achievement gap that exists between them and their nondisabled peers. That accomplishment is priceless. It empowers my scholars to see how they can drive their success and keep their paw moving, step by step, year by year, until the impossible suddenly seems possible.





# KEITH ROBINSON

9th GRADE ALGEBRA

*People's Preparatory Charter School  
Newark, N.J.*

*Though he once* aspired to be an accountant, Keith Robinson found his passion for teaching in Harlem, where he taught for four years through Teach For America before moving to Newark, N.J. When he joined People's Preparatory Charter School in 2011, the high school lacked both a building and students. As the school's founding algebra teacher and one of its leaders, Keith got to work creating a rigorous curriculum to help incoming students meet college-readiness standards.

Math is intimidating to many students, but Keith has helped build his department into a powerhouse. This year, 20 percent of his students scored in the top quartile nationally on the ACT EXPLORE test—up fivefold from 4 percent the year before. Under Keith's instruction, students are learning to conquer math, not fear it.

Based on his voracious reading of research, Keith came to believe that students often struggle to succeed because they see math as a subject that requires natural ability, when in reality success depends primarily on practice and persistence. In his classroom, where working hard is a shared value, students embrace their struggles and the risk of failure.

"Keith is extremely passionate and creative and pushes his students to maximize their potential," said Shira Fishman. "He focuses his students on the 'growth mindset,' telling them it isn't about being 'smart,' it is about growing and learning as part of the process to 'become smart.'"

In his essay, "Gettin' Messi: How Mistakes Make Mathematicians," Keith describes how he forges a classroom culture that values hard work over natural ability, celebrating the brilliant mistakes that are the hallmark of true learning.



## GETTIN' MESSI:

# HOW MISTAKES MAKE MATHEMATICIANS

*“Gettin’ Messi” becomes our way of rallying around the idea that we only get good through hard work.*

In my classroom, the most important lesson of the year begins with a question almost no one can answer.

“Who is this?” I ask, putting a picture of a soccer star on the board. I teach in Newark, N.J., where most of my students have never even seen a soccer game. In two years of teaching this lesson, only one student has ever raised a hand.

“This is Lionel Messi,” I say. “The greatest soccer player in the world. And if you don’t believe me, watch this.”

I play a highlight reel of some of his most unbelievable plays:

Messi takes an impossibly long shot that looks like it’s going to sail way wide, then suddenly the ball snaps back and curves into the corner of the net, just past the hands of the diving goalie. Shouts of “Whaaaat?!” ring out from the class.

Messi dribbles through and around the entire opposing team, as if the soccer ball was strung to his foot like a yo-yo, shooting and, of course, scoring. “That’s crazy!” marvels one student.

Messi kicks the ball up over defenders’ heads, through their legs, and into the goal. There’s also a sequence of plays where Messi simply embarrasses players by making them fall as he whizzes past. A final round of “Ohhhhh!” and “No way!” pours from the room.

But it’s not Messi’s “mad skills” we want to highlight. He’s more than just the greatest player in the world—he might also be the hardest working. Messi’s humility and his mistakes are just as important as his highlights.

I follow up our highlight reel by showing students pictures and video of Messi dribbling through cones at practice, the same drill that a 5-year-old kid would be doing at the local youth league. Then I play an eight-minute video of him practicing free kicks over and over and over again, letting the video run in the background as I continue the lesson. Many of these kicks sail wide of the goal, clang off the post or hit the fake defenders posted in front of him.

Math class will never be the same again. From here on out, Messi will be our model. “Gettin’ Messi” becomes our way of rallying around the idea that we only get good through hard work. We only get better by making mistakes.

It’s “Gettin’ Messi” that helps make us smart at math.

### The Messi Mentality

When you make a mistake or do something wrong anywhere in life, you have two options for how to move forward.

Option No. 1 is to believe the mistake is a reflection on you as a person, on your intelligence, on your talent, and to conclude that you must not be very good at this thing. Students may think, “Man, I stink at this. I wish I was better.” Psychologist Carol Dweck calls this the “fixed mindset.”

The anxiety that so many of my students experience when they step foot into an algebra classroom is derived from this fixed mindset. If answering questions correctly is how we prove our skill at math, how scary must it be to try and learn something new, especially something complex? And forget about answering anything but the easiest questions publicly. Every mistake becomes a mark against you.

Option No. 2 is to believe that you simply haven’t developed the skill necessary to successfully complete the task, but that if you work hard enough, you can. Students may think, “Man, I’m not very good at this yet. I must need to work a bit harder or change something about my approach if I want to get this right.” This is what Dweck calls the “growth mindset.”

In my class, you could also call it the Messi mentality.

Students who have this mindset understand the power of the word “Yet.”

When Ashley tells me, “Math is my least favorite subject because I’m just not good at it,” the implication is that she’ll never be good at it. All I need to say is, “...yet.” Now, the implication is that how good she is at math is not static but fluid. She can be good at math; she just hasn’t gotten there...yet.

If you’ve adopted the Messi mentality, every obstacle, every wrong answer, every mistake becomes a chance to develop, a chance to get smarter and better at math. This quickly creates

*Every obstacle, every wrong answer, every mistake becomes a chance to develop, a chance to get smarter and become better at math.*

a passion for stretching and pushing yourself, even—and especially—when the going gets tough.

This is the key to creating an environment where students at all skill levels seek to challenge themselves and overcome obstacles on the way to being ready for college.

Here's how I go about trying to help my students make this transformation.

### Getting Ready to Get Messi

Learning algebra is hard work, so it's important that everyone in class expects to expend effort and feel OK about getting things wrong. Early in the school year, I try to show them what this looks like. I start by saying something that sounds insane.

"I'd actually prefer you get some questions wrong," I tell them.

"What?! Why?!" asks Caxia.

"Well, here. Take this pen. Now lift it like this...a thousand times," I say, mimicking bicep curls. "No, for real, keep lifting. Are you getting stronger?"

"No," she huffs, later admitting that what she really wanted to say was, "You're crazy, Mr. Robinson."

"Of course you're not, and it's exactly the same way with math," I say. "You don't get any smarter at math by just getting a bunch of questions right. Now pick up your backpack and lift it in the same way. Keep going. Keep going. How does your arm feel now?"

"It kinda hurts."

"That's because you worked out those muscles," I say.

"Now pick up your desk, and lift it over your head."

"What?! I can't!"

"I know you can't...yet," I say. "But imagine you keep trying every day. Today we lift the desk together. Tomorrow, I help a little less and the next day a little less until eventually you're lifting the desk all by yourself. Then would you be getting stronger?"

She pauses for a moment. "Yeah. I guess I would be."

"Of course you would be," I say. "You'd be getting a lot stronger, and it's exactly the same way with math. You only get smarter at math by pushing yourself to the limit. And how do you know you're really pushing yourself? Because you're getting questions wrong. It's like when Messi was practicing those free kicks. They're not all going to go in, but that's how you know you're pushing yourself."

We've now taken another step toward understanding that getting smarter at math—or really, anything—takes a lot of hard work and practice, a lot of effective effort and, almost by definition, mistakes.



Working together to learn from mistakes.



## PRAISING MESSI-NESS

An important way of reinforcing the Messi mentality is to praise effort rather than talent or skill (Doug Lemov dubs this “Precise Praise”). And the difference is so subtle.

It’s the difference between saying, “Wow, you got eight right. That’s a really good score. You must be smart at this,” and saying, “Wow, you got eight right. That’s a really good score. You must have worked really hard at this.”

It’s the difference between Lanayah being so caught up in being right that she avoids the challenging problems, and Finesse realizing that right or wrong, it’s the work you put in that counts. Challenges might mean making a mistake, but as a result, challenge also means getting smarter.

The messages we send are often most subtle when reflecting on the completion of a task or assessment. I tend to ask students, “How’d it go?” and for the longest time, when met with a response like Robert saying, “It was so easy,” I was thrilled. I felt a sense of pride and accomplishment like, “I did that! I taught the \_\_\_\_ out of those objectives!”

It’s only more recently that I realized the message of low expectations I was sending; the same message Robert was sending to himself and that I was reinforcing. It’s as if Robert was saying, “I did well. If it was hard, I wouldn’t have done well, so it must have been easy.”

At moments like these, my new response is, “No it wasn’t. I know because I was up all night making it hard. Give yourself some credit. You made it happen.” I also love to remind them of all the mistakes they made along the way to mastering these very concepts. It reestablishes the bar. It refocuses them on the effort it takes to get smart.

## Celebrating Mistakes

The not-so-secret secret that I think drives my students’ success is our focus on mistakes. We are not afraid of mistakes. We can’t be and still develop as mathematicians. They’re central to the Messi mentality.

And let’s face it, right answers are generally less interesting than wrong answers. Why not exploit that fact? Why not celebrate it? Especially when there’s more to learn from a wrong answer than from a right answer. The problem becomes convincing students that this is true.

Take, for instance, students writing equations to represent and model real-world situations.

When a student gets the right equation, it becomes difficult to assess how deep the understanding really is. But the level of discourse increases instantly when Ashley raises her hand and says, “I got  $3x - 2 = 12$ . How is that not right?”

The question becomes, “Well, what situation is Ashley’s equation modeling?”

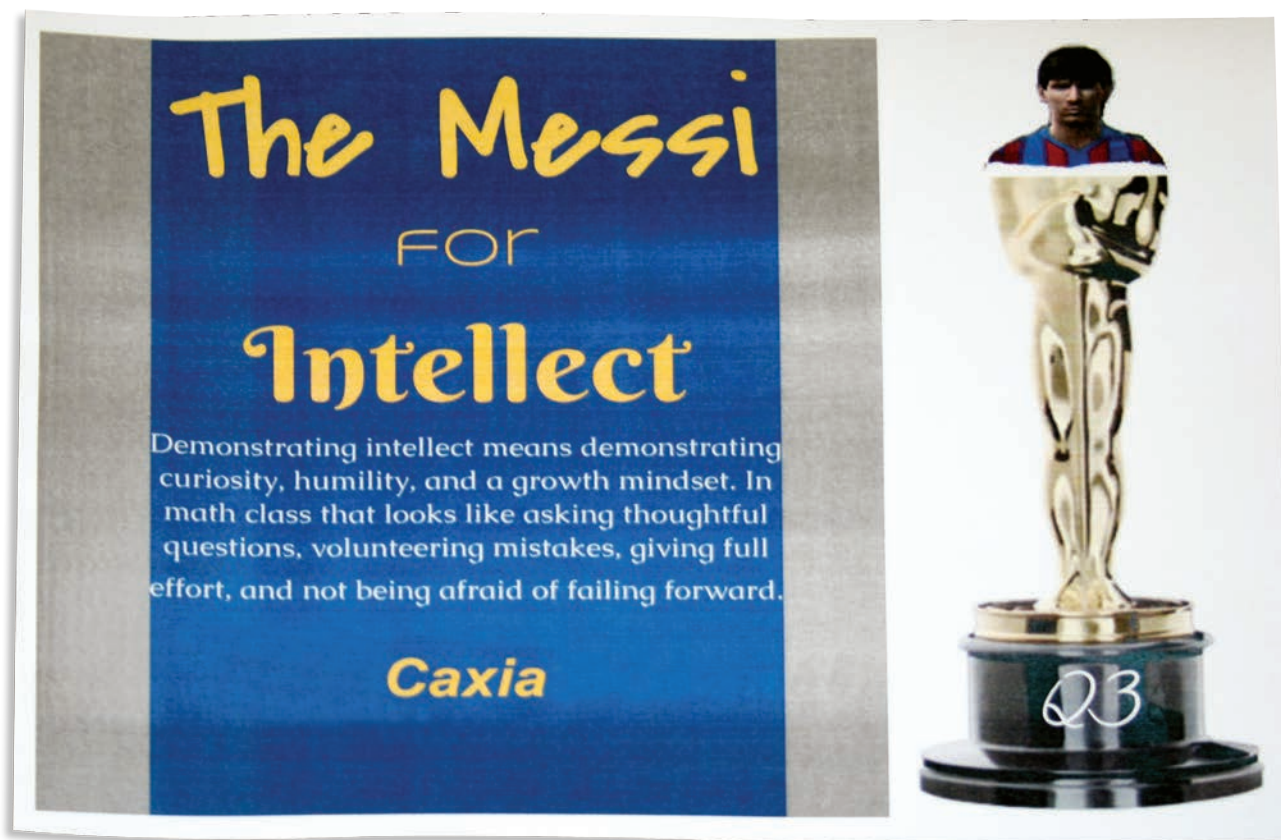
We get to dig deeper into what the variable actually represents, what the coefficients represent, what the constants represent, what the operations represent, and what makes us decide how each of these elements fit into our equation. Boom! Thank you, Ashley. Intellect props for your humility and growth mindset. You’ve pushed everyone to work that much harder and get that much smarter.

I tell her as much, to make sure that the class knows it, too.

Here’s another way this works. At the end of each class period, my students take an exit ticket wherein I assess the objective that was being taught. These get graded and handed back the next day, so students get to see if their answers were correct. But we only share the mistakes. In fact, we celebrate the mistakes and give growth mindset and humility props for the really good ones.

In the beginning of the year, when this process is still new, it is the students who are already pretty confident in math who tend to be the ones sharing their errors. This sends a really important but unspoken message: Even the most well-prepared students make mistakes. Soon you see Brianna’s hand, Diamond’s hand and Kashawn’s hand shooting into the air to volunteer their mistakes before I’ve even spoken a word. (But you don’t see Caxia’s hand, yet.)

This takes some preparation, as well as sensitivity. I process their mistakes in the evening, then approach students about them the next day. I get to tell Caxia, who was initially reluctant to share mistakes and in fact went out of her way to hide them,



Giving props for humility and growth mindset.

“Hey, I have your exit ticket from yesterday. There’s something awesome on it that I want to show the class.”

Then, I can project Caxia’s exit ticket onto a screen at the front of the room and tell the whole class, “Hey, check out this interesting mistake Caxia made. Let’s all learn from it. Caxia, tell us what you did.”

In this example, she left an answer as  $7x * 3$  instead of simplifying all the way to  $21x$ . She explains that you can’t simplify any further because  $7x$  and  $3$  aren’t like terms, which would be totally right if it was  $7x + 3$  or  $7x - 3$ . But with multiplying and dividing, you don’t need to worry about like terms. We now get to reinforce that concept using concrete examples like real money.

“So if I have seven \$100 bills and I multiply it by three, what will I have? What if I have seven \$100 bills and add three—not three \$100 bills, just three dollars. What happens then? Thank you, Caxia. You allowed this to happen. Intellect props for your humility and growth mindset.”

The message I get to send to the class: Everyone makes mistakes. We learn from these mistakes, so we don’t make them again on a bigger assessment when the stakes are higher. And the message to Caxia: That wasn’t so bad. Was it? A mistake

*The not-so-secret secret that I think drives my students’ success is our focus on mistakes.*

is only bad if it’s not exposed and corrected. It’s not that you didn’t get the problem right. It’s that you didn’t get it right...yet.

I reinforce this by explicitly training students to look for mistakes and learn from them. My favorite way is with “Mr. Robinson is so untrained. Find his blunder.” problems.

These are questions on class work or homework where I complete the problem, intentionally making a mistake that the students need to identify and explain. Surprisingly, even though the students know (at least I think they know) that these are not mistakes that I’ve actually made, it seems to reinforce the idea that making a mistake is not a reflection of your innate math ability. It’s also a fun game that plays into the students’ natural and seemingly endless desire to prove their teacher wrong.

What’s great is that my mistake is a given, so students need to keep looking until they find it. When Nick tries to opt out and say, “It’s right,” all I have to say is, “No it’s not...(you guessed it) yet.”

*It's not that you didn't get the problem right. It's that you didn't get it right, yet.*

### **Celebrating Success: The Messis**

I end every marking period by throwing crumpled pieces of paper at my students.

These are our end-of-marking-period awards, The Messis, which are given in three categories that correspond to our People's Prep core values of intellect, empathy and action. Let's focus on the Messi for intellect, which is defined on the award: "Demonstrating curiosity, humility and a growth mindset. In math class, that looks like asking thoughtful questions, volunteering mistakes, giving full effort and not being afraid of failing forward."

The idea is that this does not go to the student with the highest grade or the highest assessment scores. It goes to the student who is, by these measures, working the hardest and learning the most. It goes to the student who is "gettin' the Messi-est." The award celebrates humility and growth mindset, the character traits that we must develop in order to deal with the mistakes, rise to the challenges and ask the thoughtful questions that go hand-in-hand with the adventure of getting better or learning anything new.

Celebrating success is not the reason we do things, but it feels really great. It's a signal that you're on the right track, that you're doing something right and that you should be proud. So for five minutes, my classroom turns into the Dolby Theatre on Oscar night (well, it's more like we just stop class five minutes early to make time for the awards; every second of class time matters).

I crumple up the paper awards for two reasons. For one, it's a play on the fact that they are called the Messis and that crumpled paper is messy (I know, it's not that funny, but it consistently gets a chuckle). More importantly, it reinforces the idea that we don't do these things for a tangible award. We do them because they push us and help us grow, both as people and as mathematicians. Of course, the first thing that most students do is try to smooth out the paper, so they can show their parents and council coaches.<sup>1</sup>

The most prestigious award of the year is given out at the end, to the student who most exemplifies the Messi mentality. Last year's winner was Caxia.

Like so many students, Caxia started the year trying desperately to cover up her math deficiencies. She was great about asking questions, but only in private. She would regularly ask a question, listen to most of my response, loudly say, "Oooooohhh," as if she'd connected the dots, and go on to get the question wrong. I quickly realized I had to make her connect the dots out loud to me before moving away.

For Caxia, it didn't take many times of, "Hey, I have your exit ticket from yesterday. There's something awesome on it that I want to show the class," before she started to realize that we didn't care how quickly she had the infamous "a-ha!" moment, just that it eventually happened. I wish I could tell you that she ended the year on top of the class, but the truth is Caxia's not there...yet. She made steady progress throughout the year, improving by 19 points from the first interim assessment to the last and was perhaps the most consistent grower. It's not about where she is but where she's headed, and right now she's trending up.

Two years ago, the winner was Ashley, who admitted to me at her home visit before ninth grade that math was her least favorite subject because she wasn't very good at it. (I have the video to prove it.)

Now, I could sit here and say, "I fundamentally changed the way Ashley approaches math," but instead, I'll tell you the truth. Ashley already firmly had a growth mindset. The line that followed, "Math is my least favorite subject because I'm just not good at it" was "I really need to work on it." She talked the talk and walked the walk. A class never passed when she didn't ask a question or when she didn't need to share one of her mistakes with the class, either to learn where she went wrong or simply because, "I thought it might help someone."

With her growth mindset and through all her effective effort, Ashley is not only now one of the higher-performing math students, she also holds one of our school's paid peer-tutor jobs for geometry. She and her mom even stayed late on parent-teacher conference night to tell me she had won a math award at her after-school learning center, and to believe her when she says you ain't seen nothing...yet.

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<sup>1</sup> Except Kuaran. He crumpled his up even more: "It's just a piece of paper. I didn't work hard for THIS."





## MORE GREAT TEACHING

Our winners represent just a small sampling of the amazing teachers nationwide who are committed to constant improvement throughout their careers. There are thousands of educators doing similarly great work across the country—each with a story to tell. We'd like to extend our thanks to the hundreds of teachers who took the time, thought and effort to apply, and especially to our accomplished finalists. Learn more about them at [www.tntp.org/fishmanprize/2013](http://www.tntp.org/fishmanprize/2013).

## ABOUT TNTP

TNTP is a national non-profit organization working to end educational inequality by ensuring that all students get excellent teachers. Founded by teachers and inspired by the power of great teaching to change lives, we help schools, districts and states grow great teachers, manage their teaching talent strategically, and build systems that prioritize effective teaching in every classroom. Since 1997, we have recruited or trained nearly 50,000 teachers for high-need schools, catalyzed large-scale reform through acclaimed studies such as *The Widget Effect* (2009) and *The Irreplaceables* (2012), pioneered next-generation teacher evaluation and development systems, and launched one of the nation's premiere awards for excellent teaching, the Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice. Today TNTP is active in more than 25 cities. [www.tntp.org](http://www.tntp.org).



## HOW TO APPLY FOR THE FISHMAN PRIZE

The 2013 Fishman Prize winners are the second cohort of what we hope will become a long tradition of excellent teachers who will share their insight into the classroom, making this paper an annual resource for what's best—and current—about classroom practice. That starts with next year's winners. For more information about how you can apply to the 2014 Fishman Prize, visit [www.tntp.org/fishman-prize/how-to-apply](http://www.tntp.org/fishman-prize/how-to-apply).

## NOMINATE A TEACHER FOR THE FISHMAN PRIZE

Do you know a great teacher making a difference in the lives of low-income students every day? Recommend him or her for the 2014 Fishman Prize. Any full-time teacher working in a high-poverty public school is eligible, and each winner receives \$25,000 and a summer residency with TNTP. For more information, visit [www.tntp.org/fishman-prize/nominate](http://www.tntp.org/fishman-prize/nominate).